

# LEADERS IN BRETHREN HISTORY

By REV. ORD GEHMAN

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary by the press of circumstances to make changes, either politically, socially, or religiously, God has always ordained that those changes should be for the better of His children. Down through the centuries of church history there have always been those who have sought, by the grace of an unchanging God, to set forth the principles of our Lord's divine ministry, past, present, and future, by precept of life, practice, and teaching. Of such were the Spirit-filled men of God who became the human forebears of the Brethren Church.



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Regarding these men and their pious lives, much is shrouded in silence. Perhaps God, in His divine wisdom, has designed that it should be so, since we have no Biblical record of the burial place of that stalwart old warrior whose "eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated" (Deut. 34:7b). Even though we are not permitted to know much about these men personally, we are allowed to know considerable about the general background from whence they came. And even the fact that we do not know a great deal about them personally does not suggest that they were not stalwart individualists. Their willingness to abide by the tenets of the Word as they understood them stands as evidence to their readiness to make any necessary sacrifices for their own convictions.

Germany had only recently passed through that era known in church history as the Dark Ages. Romanism and popery had held their subjects in woeful ignorance of the message of the Word of God. In the decades immediately following sincere and worthy hearts cried out for light. God answered in His divine Word. Martin Luther came upon the stage during these difficult times with the hope of cleaning up the church from the inside, but he was forced by circumstances under God's mighty hand to become the leader of the Reformation movement. But Lutheranism carried over so much of Catholicism in its creed and form that it was not the answer to the current problem.

The twelfth century had produced the Waldenses. But they were not evangelistic in the promulgation of their spiritual estate and were driven into retirement. Their contribution to the general religious life of Europe was limited, but they were acknowledged by all who knew them as a very devout and pious people.

In the middle seventeenth century there arose in Germany a devout group of people who came to be dubbed "the Tunkers" because of their baptistic doctrine of immersion. They were intensely pietistic in their doctrine and practices and urged upon decadent Protestantism a more pious life. They rejected the generally accepted doctrine of infant baptism and insisted upon the separation of church and state. As

a result of their staunchness for their beliefs, persecutions arose and they were driven from place to place. One such group settled at Schwarzenau on the Elber River, about three miles from Berlenberg, Germany. With a portion of this group we are specifically interested, for from this background came the leaders whose doctrinal tenets came to be crystallized in the Brethren Church.

The date of 1708 speaks much to one familiar with early Brethren history, for it was sometime during this year that eight stalwart souls, five men and three women, covenanted together before God to carry out their convictions of true immersion baptism. They laid great stress upon baptism for the believer because it spoke to them of death to an old life of formalism and a new life in the freedom of conscience to worship God as their sincere hearts dictated.

Driven by a consuming passion to fulfill God's will as they felt it was revealed in the New Testament ordinances, these few formed the nucleus of a new Christian church, the practice and teaching of which is reflected today in the Brethren Church.

Little is known of these eight who formed this infant organization. We do not know who of the group of men performed the first baptismal act on this occasion, but we do know it was not Alexander Mack, Sr., for he was the first to be baptized. Since he had been previously chosen to be their minister, he in turn led the other seven into the waters of the Elber River in the quietness of the early morning so that it would be kept from the eyes of wondering and misunderstanding spectators.

About the first minister of this group we know little. He was a miller by trade. Since the little group of which he was the minister was intensely evangelistic, their zeal and enthusiasm soon spread through their community. By 1715 there was a sizeable congregation at Schwarzenau. Although Alexander Mack had had a flourishing trade from his mill and owned several vineyards, he suffered the loss of all this and other property as a result of persecutions and confiscations in building up the work of the church. He came to Beggarstown, near Philadelphia, in 1729 with a portion of his congregation and established a church. He died in 1735 at the age of 56 and was buried in the Germantown cemetery. His son, Alexander, Jr., succeeded him in the work he had labored so sacrificially to maintain and advance.

The other four brethren in this early group, George Greby, Lucas Fetter, Andrew Boney, and John Klipping, did not manifest distinct qualities of leadership and all we know of them is that they aided in constituting this first group. These early Brethren suffered great physical privation and persecution because of their new-found joy and liberty in Christian worship.

Immediately following these crucial years in the early eighteenth century, other leaders of note and ability were added unto their numbers in Germany. One such was Peter Becker. Elder Becker was born in Dillsheim in 1687. He was contacted by the Brethren

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in Krefeld in 1714 where there was a thriving and prosperous church. He embraced the tenets of the Brethren and left his Presbyterian background. Persecution and strife caused him to come to Germantown, Pa., in 1719, bringing a number from his church with him. Elder Becker became the first minister of the Brethren in America. His accomplishments for the Lord and the church were performed in the early days of the Brethren in America. He died in 1758 after considerable evangelistic work in the establishing of the Brethren faith and doctrine in the eastern United States.

One other leader worthy of especial mention here was John Jacob Hang. A printer by trade, he was attracted to the society of the Brethren and did their first printing for them. Under his supervision and labor the Berlenberg Bible was printed with notes in three volumes in 1726. His printing press was sent to America in 1736 where it came into the possession of Christopher Saur, who became the champion of religious printing in early American Brethrenism.